STENNIS SPACE CENTER

HISTORY PROJECT

THE MISSISSIPPI ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

of

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Volume 415
1992

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MR. MACK HERRING

Interviewer: Mr. Steven Patterson

The Mississippi Oral History Program is under the policy direction of the Oral History Committee comprised of the following persons:

Biography

Mack R. Herring was born in Geneva, Alabama, on August 26, 1935, to Robert Lee Herring and Lillie Ray Etheridge Herring. After graduating from Geneva High School, he attended the University of Alabama, where he received a B.A. degree in journalism. After graduating from college, Mr. Herring was editor of the *Geneva County Reaper* and worked as a reporter for the *Dothan Eagle* before accepting the position of public information officer at the Army Aviation Center, Fort Rucker, Alabama. In 1961 Mr. Herring was appointed public affairs specialist at Marshall Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama.

In 1973 Mr. Herring became the public affairs officer for the Mississippi Test Facility in Hancock County, Mississippi. In this capacity he conducted the center's public programs during the years the facility was under construction and throughout the testing of the Saturn V Apollo moon rockets. He also served as press officer onboard ships assigned to the Astronaut Recovery Team, retrieving astronauts returning from space during the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs.

In 1969 Mr. Herring became astronaut protocol officer at NASA Headquarters, Washington, D.C. For two years he arranged and assisted the Apollo astronauts with public appearances and other related special events. He returned to MTF in 1971 to assist in the transition of the installation from a single-purpose rocket test facility to a multi-agency research center. During this time he established the center's first newspaper, *Lagniappe*, as well as the center's first aerospace education program, the Visitors Center, and the Teachers Resource Center. Mr. Herring was assigned to the director's staff in 1990 when he was named historian of the Stennis Space Center. He continues to serve in that capacity today.

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This is an interview with Mack Herring in conjunction with the Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi and the Stennis Space Center. The interviewer is Steven Patterson. The interview is being recorded at Mr. Herring's home on April 23, 1992.

Patterson: First of all, Mr. Herring, thanks for letting me come into your home this afternoon. I appreciate it. Just for starting off, just some background information. When and where were you born?

Herring: Steve, I was born in Geneva, Alabama, August 26, 1935. Geneva is a small town in southeast Alabama. About the time I was born, about thirty-five hundred or four thousand people. The county seat of Geneva County.

Patterson: Where did you attend college?

Herring: At the University of Alabama.

Patterson: With a degree in journalism?

Herring: Journalism. Majored in journalism and minored in English and creative writing, and also had enough hours to have been a minor in history.

Patterson: You've used your college education pretty well then.

Herring: Yes. It's been an interesting thing. When I left the university my first job was I was editor of a weekly newspaper in Geneva, Alabama. So I started right out as being sort of the lone person in the newspaper office, writing and editing the newspaper. Gathering the stories, doing the advertising, laying the ads out, writing the editorials. So right off the bat I began to use the journalism part of my education.

After I worked there for about nine months, I accepted a job with the daily newspaper in Dothan, Alabama. I was a reporter and writer for that newspaper for three years. So again I had an opportunity to draw on a lot of that liberal arts type of education.

Being a reporter you know a lot about many different things, the better you can converse with people about politics, city planning. You know, sometimes you do other things, maybe
art-oriented, historically-oriented. So a liberal arts education really ties in good with being a reporter.

Patterson: Sounds kind of like once you got to Mississippi Test Facility you may have been the lone wolf as far as liberal arts goes, huh? With all those engineers.

Herring: Pretty much. In fact that was an interesting aspect of my career was working all those years primarily with engineers. I was talking to someone just the other day about that. In many ways you are not on the same wavelength at times because, you know, your interests and education and training have just been different. So I guess, you know, that the technical people need some people like myself with varied backgrounds to sort of help them fend off the public and help them with community affairs and to deal with the media and things like that where they can get on about their technical business. In this case, building and testing rockets.

Patterson: What years were you in Dothan?

Herring: I was in Dothan from late 1957, fall of '57, until I went to work up in Huntsville, Alabama.

Patterson: Was that with NASA?

Herring: Yes, with NASA. I still lived in Dothan; I worked one year as a public information officer with the Army Aviation Center at Fort Rucker. I worked there 1960 to '61; I went to work at Huntsville in '61.

Patterson: What did your work in Huntsville entail?

Herring: It was with Marshall Space Flight Center. I worked in the Public Affairs Office in the news division. There were only three of us in the news division at that time. They probably have ten or twelve people there now. We wrote all of the press releases. We reviewed all the advertising copy. We wrote articles for magazines. We handled all the public events as far as handling the media was concerned.

Went down to the Cape, Cape Canaveral, because at that time it was part of the Marshall Center. They called it Launch Operations Directorate, part of the Huntsville organization. We would have launches down there, and we would be responsible for going down there and helping the news media gather their stories.

Patterson: Did you find this work to be very challenging?

Herring: Oh, yes. It was very, very busy and very challenging. In fact we routinely worked six-day weeks. We would work Saturdays. Then during launches when we would be going to the Cape, we had a shuttle plane to go back and forth to the Cape. It wasn't unusual, you know, during a launch period to go down there and work all week and then fly back and work on the weekend in Huntsville. Then go back and work down at Cape Canaveral. So it was very long hours. About ten hours a day, six days a week on an average.

Another thing I did was write for, Dr. Wernher von Braun, who was the director at the Marshall Center. He was already a famous rocket scientist whenever he came to Huntsville. He had a sort of notoriety all around the entire world.

Patterson: Yes, sir.

Herring: He was bombarded with the news media requests, people wanting to interview him kept us busy, setting up those interviews and helping manage that. Also, he was requested to write a lot of material for magazines and newspapers. I was sort of the designated person who wrote his magazine and newspaper articles while I was there.

Patterson: Would you write them and then he looked at them, is that the way it worked?

Herring: Right. You know, I would draft them and then he would look at them. He carefully read every word in them. It wasn't a matter of being a ghostwriter for him, where you write a paper conceiving his ideas. You pretty much tried to make a study of him and his philosophies, policies to where you were able to get that down on the manuscript.

Patterson: So you really had to know a lot about the nuts and bolts of the trade too?

Herring: Yes. You had to really make it your business, to do a lot of reading and a lot of talking to other engineers, you know, the engineers and scientists in order to get as much information as you could from them to where you could make these articles more meaningful. Again, the reporter's background came in handy there. In fact, that was one of the main reasons, I was told, that they hired me. I was there because of my writing ability. They had kind of followed me down in Dothan when I was working for that newspaper and Fort Rucker when I was public information officer there. So that was one of the things that they hired me to do was to do this kind of writing for von Braun and for the press releases for the Center.

Patterson: Well, what about von Braun's style. What kind of writing style did he prefer from you, something simple?

Herring: Very simple. He used to really emphasize to us that he wanted his writing to where the man on the street, as he called it—he preferred to use that expression all the time—he wanted the man on the street to understand his language. The first article I ever wrote for von Braun was for a magazine about building a colony on the moon. I'll tell a slight anecdote here because I had only been working there for a week when I got that assignment. So when I went in to talk to Dr. von Braun, you know, he welcomed me to the Marshall Center, he was a very warm, very friendly man. He liked to bear hug you, put his arms around you and you know. He asked me if I had ever read any science fiction. I told him I had and he said, "Well, that's all this is. You just want to let your imagination go wild and don't worry about thinking about things that we can't do. Generally, what man can see he can accomplish." In fact, he used the expression, he said, "Our future thinkers here try to look ahead about twenty-five years. We try to keep our planning about twenty-five years in advance. Still, the way technology progresses, we will still be about ten years short. Whenever we're working at twenty-five years in the future, we'll be ten years short on man's actual accomplishments." I never will forget the first time whenever I got that assignment I went out and he gave me a list of all of the future planners he had there at the Marshall Center. He said, "Go talk to these people and get their ideas. You put them down and you write them and bring them back." So I did and as I was talking to these various future planners and thinkers that he had, like Ernest Stuhlinger, people that were thinking about going to Mars and all.

Patterson: Were most of these Germans?

Herring: Yes, yes. In fact I think most of them were German. Particularly Dr. Stuhlinger, who was the top future planner. I got back and I said, "My Lord, I have really made a mistake coming up here. This stuff is just not real. These people are talking about going to the moon and Mars like it's going across the street, like it's just old hat and they are going to do it." The biggest thing is they talked with such confidence about what they were going to do that you felt that they didn't see any problem with going to the moon. That was the thing that really astonished me. But when I finished that article and Dr. von Braun read it, sent it back without any changes. He just put a little note on it that said, "Great job, Mack, keep up the good work." So I went around with the big head. A lot of my colleagues, you know, were bragging about what a good job it was.

So the next time I wrote an article, I used more engineering terminology and more scientific terminology. He tore that article all to pieces. (laughter) He had marks all over it. He said something to the effect, "Keep it simple. I'm a pretty damn good engineer and I can't understand a lot of this language." (laughter) So he brought me back down to Earth.

Patterson: Pretty quick, huh.

Herring: Yes.

Patterson: I've heard you tell a story about von Braun and memos and how he liked them short. Could you just expound a little on that? How the one page—

Herring: Yes. What he would do, we had a system he had, the von Braun notes. He couldn't have all the people reporting to him every week. If you felt that there was something that you really wanted him to see, you could include it in your weekly notes to your boss and then he was duty bound, if you felt strongly about von Braun seeing that, he was duty bound to forward it on to von Braun himself. So it was a chain of command. It was a way that von Braun could converse with even the lowest strata in his chain of command. von Braun would always, when he would put a little short brief paragraph, real crisp, of what you said, he would always comment on it, and it would come back down the chain of command to you. I didn't do that very often. I didn't include things from my public affairs business down here in Mississippi up to him. But when I did, there was a few times when I felt like there was something that we were doing that would be of interest to him and I would include it. It was interesting to see how it would go up and down the chain of command.

Patterson: But he didn't want any of these to be over a page, did he?

Herring: No, no.

Patterson: Wanted it to be very concise.

Herring: Very short and very concise.

Patterson: When did you first get involved with the Mississippi Test Facility?

Herring: Dr. von Braun had appointed Captain William C. Fortune, who was a Navy captain on loan to NASA from the Navy, as the first project manager for the Mississippi Test Facility. That would go back to, Captain Fortune was probably appointed to that in early fall of 1962. When he was appointed, one day he came down to our public affairs office. He was a very warm, friendly man. Or is, he lives in California now; he's been retired for many years. But he had a picture of the Pearl River with the Rouchon House, which was a fishing lodge down on the river. He walked into our public affairs office and tossed this picture down on my desk and said, “How would you like to work there?” In kind of a way he was sort of recruiting me, I think. And so I looked at the picture and said, “My Lord, I really would like to work there.” I've always liked the outdoors. I like the swamps and that kind of thing. That very pristine setting was attractive to me.

So when a position became open I talked to my boss at that time was another Navy captain. And I expressed to him a desire to come down as public affairs officer for

this new test facility. So I was one of two final candidates for the job. Myself and Ed Buckley, who is now the director of the Alabama Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville. And Ed and I came down together on a sort of recruiting trip. We first came down here in January of '63. The day we flew down here from Huntsville, we landed at Keesler Air Force Base. I remember it was a little private charter that they had flown us down on. We passed by the tower; it was eighteen degrees, so it was pretty cold. We came out and toured the swamp, you know, and the base. Then we had one employee, one nice employee then that kept the place going, Margaret McCormick, who was the receptionist. So she talked with us and we went around and we talked with the people in the community. We attended a meeting in Hancock County; of course it was a private meeting in the courthouse, down a couple of blocks from where we are sitting. Then we went over to New Orleans and spent the night in New Orleans. So that was my first indoctrination to this area, and I was selected for the job.

Patterson: What did you think when you saw the swamp out there?

Herring: Well, you know, to me I just saw it as going to be a tremendously fun project. You know, fun job. Because I just like the river and I like the swamp, I like the woods and the small town atmosphere here. Plus it was the fact that you're going to have the opportunity as I saw it to be in on the very ground floor, and boy, it was the ground floor.

Patterson: That was exciting to you?

Herring: Yes. Very exciting. When I moved my family down here, when I came down with my wife, my two little boys, they were small at that time. We were driving down old Highway 43 from Picayune to the test site. So I stopped right out in the middle of the road. There wasn't any traffic on that road back in those years. I took an artist's concept and put it out on the (inaudible) and I was pointing out to my wife, "We are going to build the test stand here, this building here"—you know. She actually started crying, real tears flowing on down her face. She said, "You know, you've really played the wild hair, this is just a big hoax. Nothing is ever going to happen here." She didn't like the idea of coming to the swamp, you know, from Huntsville.

Patterson: Is the Rouchon House still standing?

Herring: Yes. Still down on the river. We changed it and modified it through the years. But it's still standing. I think it's going to be used as a conference center down on the river now.

Patterson: Did you move directly to Bay St. Louis when you came?

Herring: Well, we came to Bay St. Louis because we really wanted to live near the water on the Coast. My wife and I at the time, we grew up as I said in Geneva which is about sixty miles from Panama City Beach. We always liked the beach. So it was an opportunity to be close to the water. And so we came to Bay St. Louis and we rented a little house here. When the movers came and brought from Decatur where we were living outside Huntsville and unloaded our furniture, we didn't notice the house too much at the time we rented it, but there wasn't any heat in it. And it was cold.

Patterson: One of the summer homes.

Herring: Summer home. The only thing I could afford in my price range in Bay St. Louis was that little house. There was two or three other houses for rent but they were above my head as far as what I could afford at that time. There wasn't any—people didn't believe any more than my wife did that we were going to build this big rocket facility. They had heard about it and read about it and everything but they didn't feel—

Patterson: They were still very doubtful.

Herring: They were still very, very skeptical.

Patterson: How did they find out, the people in Hancock County, that it was going to come, the test facility?

Herring: Well, the first news of it, I was involved in that. I wrote the press release from Huntsville. In fact, I was in my office one day and my boss was up in Washington, Bart Slattery, and he called and spoke to me and he asked that I get his secretary to get the information for a press release out of the safe in his office. It was locked up in a safe. So I got that information from his secretary and wrote the press release, announcing that we were going to build the test facility. He instructed me to call the head of public affairs at NASA headquarters and coordinate it, which I did. Then it was set for a 2 P.M. release. I understand that when that release went out that a lot of people were affected by it.

Patterson: What month and year?

Herring: OK, this was October 25, 1961.

Patterson: OK.

Herring: It was just a one-page release, but it had a huge impact all over Mississippi. It was coordinated with Senator Stennis's office, who was the United States Senator, and the rest of the Congressional delegation, but Senator Stennis was the person who primarily

made the release as far as political interests. So you had the NASA release and Senator Stennis's release that went out the same time.

Some of the people, one man even died of a heart attack who lived in one of the communities, he died that day of the shock, you know, reading that in the paper. Hearing about it and knowing he was going to be leaving land that he had been on, his family had been on for generations. It caused him to have, his son told me about it, a heart attack and died.

Other people were just in total shock because they just couldn't believe that this was happening to the land. They didn't.

Patterson: When you came here did you feel any resentment from the native Mississippians?

Herring: Yes, yes. I felt some. But the poor people that felt the most were the people from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who were our—

Patterson: They purchased the land.

Herring: Yes. They were our agents for land acquisition and construction. They had a very nasty job to do. They had to go around and negotiate with the people to sell them their land because it was filed in the courts under eminent domain, and people had to sell it. The Corps of Engineers paid them what we called fair market value in those days. I guess the Corps people, you know, they drove around in brown cars that were the color of the army, you know. (laughter) Olive-drab cars. NASA, we had a white staff car we drove.

Patterson: So you were the good guys, huh?

Herring: We were the good guys. (laughter) We were going to bring in money and the Corps of Engineers were here to take away their land. So they caught really the big brunt of the ill will.

My job primarily was to tell as many people as fast as I could, alert people and make them aware that we were going to build this place.

Patterson: This was after you moved here?

Herring: Yes, this was after I moved here.

Patterson: But you said that there was still some disbelief among the people.

Herring: Yes. I was very young then and I said, "Well, how do you do this?" You just use any opportunity you can to talk to people, to write press releases, to do anything to create the public relations and awareness that, "We *are* going to build this base."

So the first year I was here I spoke to over a hundred and ten different groups. Sometimes I'd give as many as three speeches in one day. I'd speak to anybody, you know, churches, schools, civic clubs. Of course, anytime I had the opportunity to write a press release about something I would. Of course, we had very primitive stuff then. I had a typewriter borrowed from an office supply company. We didn't have a budget when we first got here because the budget cycle hadn't come around yet. So we didn't have money really appropriated for our base. But it was really fun. A young person couldn't dream of anything that was more fun than that job was.

(The interview continues on tape one, side two.)

Patterson: All right, let's go ahead and pick back up. Something about the people here?

Herring: The people here in Bay St. Louis and Picayune, Pass Christian and Long Beach, and over in Slidell were really, really warm, friendly people. After they got over the initial shock that we were coming here, they were just very, very pleased that they were finally getting something like NASA to come here. When you stop and think about it, too, the people over, like for instance, in Harrison County were pretty good at bringing in a federal project because they had some experience with Keesler Air Force Base and with the Seabees Center that it was already, these things were already here. So the people were over in Harrison County and along that Coast were pretty sophisticated at welcoming people in. They had been in the tourism business for a hundred years, you know, as far as hotels and stuff like that. So they were sort of good at handling newcomers and visitors to the community.

And since it was a very economically depressed area at the time we got here, there was a kind of sense of feeling grateful to have this new type of industry here. You know, Mississippi has always been a very proud state. Its participation in national affairs and things like that. So to be a part of the space program really gave Mississippi something to be proud of.

Patterson: Do you think it was a real big boost for the economy?

Herring: Yes. A huge boost. I mean, it went from, like Hancock County as I recall where the base proper is located, at the time we got here, out of all the counties in Mississippi, Hancock County was the most economically depressed county in the state. Well, within a matter of two or three years after we had located here, we had all this construction going on, millions and millions of dollars of construction and building

going on. Hancock County went all the way from the most economically depressed county in the state to having the highest per capita income in the state. You know, at the time Mississippi had the lowest per capita income in the United States.

Patterson: Not much (laughing) has changed.

Herring: We had come to the place that was located in an area that was the most economically depressed county in the entire United States. Within just two or three years it was right on a par with practically any place in the country as far as per capita income.

Patterson: As far as that region.

Herring: For the area. So it was an interesting thing to see. I think some of the people that really felt an animosity toward us were people that had to give up their land. I always felt, and my bosses always felt and passed this along to the men, that we really owed these people a great debt, because we came in here and took land that had been in their families, in some cases, for five or six generations. Some people going back to the very beginnings of civilized European cultures coming into the Coast. Some of the original families were located right out there on the land that we took.

Patterson: Was there anything else that you want to tell me about your settling-in period here? Or do you want to move on?

Herring: Well, there was a lot of interesting things happening back in that settling-in period. I'll have to say that when we were working out there in the spring in 1963 before construction started, we were just a handful of people, eight or ten of us, started out with just McCormick and myself. We had one support contractor we had borrowed from our Michoud plant in New Orleans and a car. It was just Margaret and myself and Art out there in the winter. It was kind of a real fun environment. Art would come in and build a fire in a big old fireplace. That was the only heat we had in that building. Margaret would make up some of that good New Orleans type coffee. It was really fun when it was just a few of us in those woods. Then a few of the other engineers would come in.

Patterson: So you were really watching the place grow.

Herring: From the ground up. I'd say that that was probably one of the happiest times of my life, the early years down here.

Patterson: Ms. McCormick really had a large role, didn't she? I mean, as far as keeping everything organized.

Herring: She sure did. Margaret did a super job. Margaret was a warm, friendly person. She also had an ability to get along with people and make people feel at home.

One of the things whenever we located here, we would have sometimes forty, fifty, sixty people a day coming down to the Rouchon House and asking questions about how can they get a job, or when will the jobs start opening up, what kinds of things were we going to have. Because there was so much unemployment in this area. We had people coming from as far away as Louisiana, Texas, you know, other states looking for work.

One of our tasks when we weren't out on the road talking to people and trying to stimulate people in the community, the community leaders, the mayors, the supervisors, the aldermen, the legislators or whoever, you know, when we weren't out trying to stimulate people to come to work here and to start expanding their schools and those kinds of things, was to tell people that we are coming down there to provide [jobs], "Hey, you know, if you hang around we're going to have jobs here." Tell them to (inaudible) the union in Gulfport, New Orleans. And sure enough we did employ everybody that wanted to work once we started working.

Patterson: So what did you do as far as P.R. work goes from, say, like the mid-'60s on to 1969?

Herring: Well, once we started testing rockets it became pretty routine. We had the testing of the Apollo rockets, particularly the second stage of the Saturn V, became the pacing item in the Apollo manned lunar landing program. When I say it became a pacing item, I mean that it was what some people called back then the long pole. It was the thing that had to be accomplished in order that we would be able to fulfill President Kennedy's promise of landing people on the moon within the decade.

Patterson: How many of these second stage tests would there be in a year?

Herring: Well, we tested a total of fifteen second stage rockets. Sixteen counting the test version which was the first one we tested. There was no other place in the country that you could test that rocket except here. We were building a stand that would test that rocket, and we could test that first stage booster in Huntsville. So that was a possibility. But we had to get that second stage stand built. But in order to do that you had to build the canals and everything else in order to have one test stand like that that would work. So you had to practically build the entire base. And I think the miraculous thing was that our people came in here and there was such teamwork going on with the Corps of Engineers and the NASA facilities people and all the contractors to bring all of this together from the time we announced that we were going to build the site in '61, up until '66 when we had that first test, in those few short years. It was almost an impossible task, but it was accomplished. We started testing April 23, 1966. We tested the last of those rockets in December of 1970. So it was a pretty short-lived program.

Patterson: But your job would be to disseminate information to the public.

Herring: News about the tests, how they were coming along. There was a great deal of interest in the testing, because we had to test them before you could launch them. So we had a lot of the national news media to come here to follow the tests. We had a lot of them that came here during the construction period, because it was economically and sociologically a national story that you were building such a facility in the swamp in Mississippi.

Patterson: Yes. (laughter)

Herring: So we were covered in practically every magazine, *Life* magazine, *U.S. News*, *Newsweek*,—

Patterson: Walter Cronkite came, too, didn't he? He and a film crew.

Herring: Yes. He came and did a story here.

Patterson: Did it ever air?

Herring: I think so. Yes. *Fortune* magazine had us in an article. *National Geographic*. All of the networks. On our first test we had coverage on network television and local television, because it was a big event. We finally got our first test off. Then it kind of became routine.

Patterson: When did you first meet the Apollo 11 astronauts?

Herring: I met, let's see, I probably met some of the Apollo astronauts on an orientation visit to our base. But I met them after the trip—I was responsible, after the lunar mission, for their first public appearance. I was working out of NASA headquarters at that time. I was down at Houston for an event called "Salute to the Team," in which the Apollo 11 astronauts thanked the NASA team nationwide for the work that they had done in making the lunar mission possible. And I was responsible for the dinner at the Rice Hotel in Houston for the three Apollo astronauts who thanked the NASA team. We had about seven hundred and fifty people there. We had the administrator of NASA, Dr. Payne, and we had Frank Borman as the master of ceremonies, we had center directors from all the NASA centers. Most importantly, we were putting together the guest list and tried to include as many contractors, you know, the guys in mechanics, the electricians and all the people that really made this thing work.

Patterson: Would you consider this to be your crowning achievement with NASA? I mean it sounds like a really big event to me.

Herring: Well, it was big, but we had a lot of other things.

Patterson: A lot of other—

Herring: I can think years later of some of the other things we've done more recently. But that was a big event. We had another big dinner in Washington called the Splashdown party. We had almost two thousand people there. We had people from all over the world and I was responsible for that thing. We had the Apollo 11 astronauts at it, too. In fact anybody who was anybody in the United States was there. It was at the Sheridan Hotel in Washington.

Patterson: You traveled a good bit with the astronauts, too, didn't you?

Herring: Yes, we traveled to a lot of cities in the country. I went with the Apollo 11 group to Milwaukee and went with Buzz Aldrin to his hometown in Montclair, New Jersey. Then also with Buzz to Chicago. And some of the other Apollo astronauts, I traveled with Fred Haise of Biloxi, we went up to Detroit. Went with several of the astronauts on trips to the Midwest and other places.

Patterson: Was this really enjoyable?

Herring: Yes. It's a lot of pressure, a lot of hard work because you'd be out there with them, doing public appearances and things on the road, you know. There were constant demands being made of you because those guys were really and truly heroes. I mean, the American people at that time really wanted to see them and wanted to let them know that they were proud of them. It was kind of like, well, maybe something like Charles Lindberg was, you know, when he made his trip across the Atlantic.

Patterson: Something caught up in that. Well, is there anything else you want to say about the astronauts or about this time?

Herring: Well, Neil Armstrong was the first man to set foot on the moon. I think Neil was actually great—whoever made the process that selected him to be the first person to set foot on the moon was really well done because Neil just seemed to do things appropriately, you know. He sensed the importance of his position and feat that they had done. Everything he did he wanted to make sure it was appropriate. Every autograph he signed, every picture he posed for, he didn't want to do anything to endorse any materials or anything like that. He didn't want to do anything that would not be appropriate for a great American hero. I'd say that Neil was one of the most impressive people that I've ever known. Very humble, very appreciative of everybody who worked with him. You know, a lot of those astronauts are that way. They were hard working, they were smart technically, and they wanted to do the right thing. That's why they leaned a lot on the public information and public relations people like myself who worked with them.

Patterson: Well, if you don't mind, let me just ask you a couple of personal questions. You have two sons.

Herring: Right.

Patterson: And do they both work for NASA?

Herring: No, only one. My youngest son, Kyle Jackson, works at the Johnson Space Center in Houston in public affairs. He was the shuttle public affairs officer for a couple of years out there. He went to the University of Alabama like I did, and he majored in journalism. He's a really good writer. Among the other things he does out there now, he is one of the commentators in mission control. So whenever you listen to the missions, when the shuttle's flying he does an eight-hour shift in the control room.

Patterson: So just like you, he has to be really in tune with the technical aspects too?

Herring: Yes. He studies hard; Kyle has always had a knack for technical matters so he has done a good job with that.

Patterson: Do you think that your love for NASA kind of drove him toward NASA also?

Herring: Yes. It kind of surprised me though because neither of my boys paid a great deal of attention to my work, or at least I didn't think they did. It was very demanding and I didn't realize that they were following the space program maybe as close as they were. So it was a surprise for me when he wanted to go to the University of Alabama. When he did and he majored in journalism that was yet another surprise. Then he became quite a good writer and that was another surprise. Some of it, I don't know, might have been competitive because we used to do a lot of things competitively. We played tennis a little bit until he could beat me and we shot pool until he could beat me at that. I think the writing ability, he just wanted to sit out and do a good job at it. I'm really proud of him. Of course, Steve, I'm proud of him too. He's just in another line of work.

Patterson: Well, great. Is there anything else you want to talk about before we quit today?

Herring: Well, one other little aspect of my career we didn't cover that's kind of interesting to me, is that one of the collateral assignments that I started doing way back in Huntsville and I did all the way through as part of my career, I was the shipboard press officer when the astronauts splashed down in the ocean. So I went out on one Mercury mission and then went out on a couple of Gemini missions.

Patterson: Oh, wow.

Herring: And on several of the Apollo missions, you know, I would be on the ships when they splashed down and the team would pick them up. It would be my job to coordinate that with the media that we had on the ship. Also, what made me think of it while we were talking about Kyle is that during the splashdown phase I would be in the combat control center of the ship where all this information would come in. And I would narrate that to the media all over the world. That was another thing that I felt I was very fortunate that I was selected to do that.

Patterson: What was it like on the ship? I would think there was a lot of excitement.

Herring: Oh, yes, because the men had been gone for days going up in space and then whenever they come down, you know, listening to the radio chatter back and forth between them and mission control, and as they got closer to the ship, you know, the contact with the ship. Then you hear the sonic boom and then finally you see a little spec coming out of the clouds and see the chute pop open and it drifts down into the ocean. A lot of excitement. You know, this was the final phase of the mission, and it was a dangerous, a really risky part of the entire mission. It splashes down and you recover them with a helicopter, which is pretty awkward and lifting them out of the spacecraft and bringing them to the ship. You know, there are a lot of unknowns, particularly if the water was the least bit rough, that added to the problems. But it was certainly exciting times.

Patterson: OK. So thanks a lot for taking the time.

Herring: Well, thank you, Steve.

Patterson: All right.

(end of the interview)